DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 357 502 EA 024 942

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TITLE Toward a Reconception of Absence in the School Workplace: Teacher Absenteeism as Invention and Social Exchange.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 35p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Finance Association (Albuquerque, NM, March 1993.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; Elementary School Teachers; *Employee Absenteeism; *Interaction; *Organizational Climate; *Teacher Attendance; Teacher Motivation; *Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS *New York

ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that formulated and tested new ways of thinking about teacher absence are presented in this paper, which is based on the premise that teacher absenteeism is a social invention that must be studied within the context of the work site and understood as a function of the social exchange that occurs therein. Prior research has used either the individual or the organization as the primary unit of analysis. This paper suggests that a complementarity exists between these perspectives, indicating a need to better understand how workplace norms are established through social interaction in individual schools. Teacher attendance data for 1989-1990 through 1991-92 were collected from four elementary schools in a western New York school district. Eleven individual/organizational variables were regressed on the frequency of short-term absence. No significant relationships were found. When schools were rank-ordered by attendance, a consistent pattern emerged that suggests the existence of a workplace attendance norm, or "absence culture," that may negate the effects of individual variables. To explore this further, telephone interviews were conducted with teachers from each of the four schools to identify ways in which schools' absence cultures differ. A questionnaire has been developed based on the phone interviews to measure cultural components of teacher absenteeism. (Contains 134 references.) (LMI)

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Toward a Reconception of Absence in the School Workplace: Teacher Absenteeism as Invention and Social Exchange

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March 1993

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to formulate and test new ways of thinking about teacher absence. We argue that teacher absenteeism is a social invention that must be studied within the context of the work site and understood as a function of the social exchange that occurs therein. Prior research on teacher absence has used either the individual or the organization as the primary unit of analysis. We see a complementary between these personal and organizational perspectives and feel the need to better understand how workplace norms are established through social interaction in individual schools. These new conceptions were tested using a multi-case study approach in four elementary schools in a Western New York school district.

Teacher attendance data was collected from four elementary schools for 1989/90 - 1991/92. Eleven individual/organizational variables were regressed on the frequency of short-term absence (<2.5 days). No significant relationships were found. When schools were rank-ordered by attendance a consistent pattern emerged with the same building having the best attendance for the three years, another building always being next to the worst, and the other two building exchanging positions once. These findings suggest the existence of a workplace attendance norm or "absence culture' that may negate the effects of individual variables.

This study is the first in series of workplaces analyses of teacher absenteeism that is intended to move the field from overly simple interpretations of employee characteristics and organizational constraints to a more insightful understanding how these perspectives intersect through social exchange.

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Toward a Reconception of Absence in the School Workplace: Teacher Absenteeism as Invention and Social Exchange

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Introduction and Objectives

Excessive employee absences are problematic for any organization, but in a labor-intensive field such as education, absenteeism is particularly troublesome. Not only do excessive absences escalate school costs, due to substitute hires, but absenteeism also wastes valuable instruction time and may endanger public confidence in schools. Yet, as Ehrenberg et al. (1989:1) note, "Somewhat surprisingly, the study of the causes and effects of teacher absenteeism has received very little attention."

The dual purpose of this paper is to formulate new ways of thinking about the absence of teachers from schools and then to propose strategies for testing these new conceptions. We argue that employee absenteeism was a twentieth century social invention that grew out of a growing conflict between institutionalized bureaucratic control of the workplace and emergent worker collective consciousness. Industrialization created needs for complex time-space expectations for collective work performance, which, in turn, created a need for reliable mechanisms of social control. The application of these industrial inventions to the school workplace are of more recent origin, with the first literature applying the term 'absenteeism' to teacher behavior not appearing until the early 1960s.

Contrary to the approach used in most prior research in this area, we feel that teacher absences must be studied within the context of specific worksites as opposed to aggrgations across worksites to the district-level. We contend that teacher absenteeism is better understood as a function of the social exchanges that occur among individuals within schools than solely as a function of teacher and/or district characteristics.

Prior research on teacher absenteeism has tended to use the individual or the district organization as the primary unit of analysis. We see a complementary between these personal and organizational perspectives, but feel the need to better understand: (a) how workplace norms are established through social interactions at individual schools; and, (b) how these norms then come to influence individual and collective patterns of attendance.

This paper reports preliminary findings from the first in what, hopefully, will be a series of exploratory analyses focussing on social exchange and norms of workplace. This is a working paper intended to share our initial attempts at reconceptualizing current notions of teacher absence. We believe that through collegial discourse and field testing our assumptions, we will be able to refine our conceptions in subsequent drafts. In the interim, we welcome suggestions and comment.

The paper begins with a discussion of inherent and invented order, specifically socially invented order and conceptions of workplace absence. Next is a review of literature on employee absenteeism which proceeds from a historical analysis of the development of bureaucratic controls of workplace behavior, to studies of attendance motivation in the industrial workplace, to more focused studies of absence in the school workplace. We examine the significance of this research from both practical and theoretical perspectives. We then test these new conceptions using a multi-case study approach in four elementary schools in a Western New York school district. The paper concludes with the preliminary findings from this site-based study.

Inherent and Invented Ordered Energy

We hope that it will not seem to readers as naive when we are convinced that we need to examine as clearly as possible the roots of our way of viewing absence. Nothing should be too elementary for serious examination, therefore, we favor use of Occam's razor; make as few assumptions as possible yet as many as are necessary.

It seems reasonable to make the ontological assumption of a universe with a persisting, probabilistic patterned field of localities of energy. At the heart of things we find ordered energy. Scientific investigation assumes that natural and human events manifest the regularities of inherent order. The inherent plasticity within ordered energy leaves room for invented order. Both are mixed in various ways in our human affairs. Language provides an example. It appears that an inherent linguistic competence is built into each of us, yet the language we speak is that invented within our cultural settings. Scientific method is also an invented order structured by rules of procedure that seek to reduce error and willful human guile in our pursuit of understanding of inherent order.

Our second assumption is that energy is an inverse function of order and, as processes evolve or modernize, this complementarity produces fields of increasing complexity and decreasing energy-need. Within social organizations, modernizing processes cause: (1) relationships to become more complex, (2) norms to move from the particular and personal toward more general or universal standards, and (3) both centralizing and decentralizing forces to increase. Social control, as it moves from personal to cultural levels, tends to become more reliable with lower levels of energy needed, because consequences of protest will be so threatening as to promote accomodation with existing order. (See, for example, Marion J. Levy, Jr., Modernization and the Structure of Societies (Princeton, 1966), especially Part I: Ch. 1 & 2, and Talcott Parsons, Societies (Prentice-Hall, 1966), especially Ch. Two).

Across the life-span of an individual, dynamic changes are likely to occur at critical choice points where energy has to be expended to bring about a succeeding, modified individual-social order. Coming of age, going into employment, changing jobs, and retirement are examples of such events. Each represents a significant point at which individual decisions (inherent energy) may be influenced by social norms (invented order). We contend that absence from the workplace should be viewed as another instance of this

intersection of energy and order, i.e., individual decisions are influenced by socially invented order.

Inherent and invented order are particularly relevent to the study of absence. So much of what we presume to know about human activity draws upon records prepared by people who, for whatever reason, had the skills and interest to create such evidence. The literature on absence relies heavily on employing institutions providing data that was ordered for their own purposes; data we will call 'special-interest' evidence. This evidence is of special interest because it indicates what the organization defines as an absence, which is a matter of social invention dictated by particular needs that may vary from organization to organization. Nevertheless, researchers tend to use this invention to ascribe inherent order to absence behavior, which in turn is then often used by organizations to validate mechanisms of social control. One of the purposes of this report is to remind readers that the artifactual evidence of workplace absence is a social invention of special interest to organizations because it can be used to control adherence to organizational expectations. In other words, using an earlier example, employee absenteeism is not inherently 'hardwired' into individuals as is linguistic competence, but rather socially invented in relation to their involvement with organizational expectations. And much like language, manifestations of absenteeism vary from place to place.

The concept 'contract' may help to further our understanding of this special-interest aspect of invention. The concept goes back far beyond written language to social-economic exchanges depending upon faithful intent which had to be symbolized some way, for example, by the promise (manus promissus) of the handshake. Within English Common Law, as it evolved out of the feudal system, contract implied master-servant relationship, one that was personal rather than collective (In this connection see: Philip Selznick, Law, Society, and Industrial Justice (Russell Sage, 1969), especially Ch.4 "Collective Bargaining and Legal Evolution").

When workers tried to act collectively it was treated as conspiracy against the divinely endorsed authority of the government. The conspiracy doctrine is an example of the inherence fallacy when inherence is claimed to validate invented order. All that is being claimed here is that the inherence fallacy claim for a social invention such as 'contract' is an example of special interest invention. It illustrates the hermeneutic problem of interpreting both written and social text, a problem underlying all human science investigation.

Absence and Social Invention

We now turn more directly to the study of absence. The idea of absence is a matter of everyday observation. It tears at the fabric of human relations and leaves activities undone. Absence involves both cognitive and emotive understanding. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) cites usage in both senses beginning with the twelfth century and carrying with it the state of being 'away from a place' and 'the time duration of such state'.

At the core of its meaning are cognitive and emotive elements together with frequency and duration of such occurances. We shall note later that the cognitive and emotive qualities of absence provide a basis for factual and moral inquiry. We shall also raise, in the context of increasing complexity and universalism associated with processes of modernization, questions about overly simple interpretations of both time and place and the ways in which they are legitimized.

Absence takes a wide variety of forms ranging from failure to be home for a meal and separation of friends to those with highly structured expectations for presence at a time and place for performance of duties, and referred to as 'absenteeism'. Normally those last expectations are specified and legitimized by an implied or written contract. In relatively simple, face-to-face societies monitoring of compliance with expectations could be dealt with personally. High legitimacy absence could be endorsed "by your leave". In any case, absence has meaning only insofar as it counters a prior expectation of a time-space presence.

Modernizing trends of nationalism and industrialism, together with growth of communication technologies, created needs for complex time-space expectations for collective work performance. Thus arose the mercantilistic need for more complex bureaucratic structures of social control and the cognitive preparation of persons to care for these resulting structures -- thereby creating a new administrative class. In other words, industry needed orderly collective adherence to work expectations governed by mechanisms of control that required relatively low levels of energy. An early form of such structures were national armies and navies.

The system of military disciplinary control established the illegitimacy of absence and recognized legitimate absence by the use of 'leave'; to be absent without leave (AWOL) carried severe sanctions. The OED cites the use of 'leave of absence' in 1771 and 'sick-leave' in the early nineteenth century. Unreliability of work performance under the put-out practices of the cottage system of industrial production, together with use of large and expensive machinery, produced the factory system. During the last half of the nineteenth century the number of industrial factory workers in the United States rose rapidly. The influx of immigrants provided an inexpensive, but unreliable supply of workers.

The conspiracy doctrine of worker collective action noted earlier, had been dealt a fatal blow by the Supreme Court of Massachussets decision, Commonwealth v. Hunt, in 1842, opening the way to growing unionism during the last quarter of the century and rapid growth of membership during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

As monopolistic industries developed during the later eighteen hundreds, there was a growing need for a more highly rationalized system of control of the workplace. By the turn of the century, industries, adapting practices found in Europe, particularly Germany, were appointing, "social secretaries" to promote, among other duties, satisfaction among workers and reduction of turnover. By the second decade of the century the secretaries had become "personnel administrators" and invented bureaucratic control was turning to absences of workers under the name 'absenteeism'.

The first reference to employee absenteeism we have found in the literature is that of Paul H. Douglas which appeared in Political Science Quarterly (Vol 34, Dec. 1919: 591-608) under the title "Absenteeism in Labor". It appears that up until that time usage had reserved absenteeism to describe landlords, particularly in Ireland, and bishops who were absent from their places of responsibility.

We contend that this application of the term absenteeism to the industrial workplace should be viewed as an invention of bureaucratic control over a growing and unionized work force. The first citation in this sense occurred in A Supplement to the Oxford Dictionary Vol I, 1972 (R.W. Burchfield, ed.). These developments made the emergence of Scientific Management a natural occurance. Frederick W. Taylor, the person most closely associated with that movement, referred over and over to the 'soldiering' of workers, an apparent reference to the stigma of lack of loyal effort in the military.

We are further impressed by the industrial parallels with developments in management of schools. The developement of bureaucratic control in industry was echoed in the organization and management of America's public schools. During the last half of the nineteenth century growing emphasis upon universal education, first at the elementary and later the secondary levels, resulted in monopolistic bureaucratization of large urban school systems; the regional school movement extended the growth of large school systems. By 1920, under pressure to hire more teachers, schools were adopting from industry the office of personnel administrator. During the twenties there was growing attention to the health of teachers and the frequency and duration of "illness absence". The increased birth-rate attending World War II resulted in a sharp growth in the demand for teachers in the fifties and sixties. Unionization of teachers, which had been slow in developing, grew explosively during the sixties. Perhaps not surprisingly, the first literature that has come to our attention applying the term 'absenteeism' to teacher absences appeared in the early sixties (See, Employee Absenteeism: A Summary of Research, Educational Research Service, Inc. 1980).

The above observations, while they have an impressionistic quality to them, lead us to the following working hypothesis:

'Employee absenteeism' is a twentieth century concept invented in the course of growing conflict between institutionalized bureaucratic control of the work place and emergent worker collective consciousness; it serves to exercise control in an area of employee performance traditionally under legitimate employer control and symbolizes authority over the worker. Modernization with its tendency toward increasing complexity of social relationships and valuations has led both industry and schools to institutionalize absence control around specified time and place expectations with limited, if any, discretion on the part of the employee.

Some would ask: Without a clear definition of place and time, how would one know if an employee is at work or not? If one does not know that, how is one to allocate sanctions either as rewards or as punishments based on service? Turning the matter over to employee discretion would create chaos. Perceptions such as these serve to legitimize current invention. New communication technology makes diversity of work places more and more possible. Clearly modernization puts strains on absenteeism control as currently invented.

We started with the assumption of ordered energy, both inherent and invented. We have speculated that these order-energy dimensions will operate cyclically both within the social work system and across the life-span of the individual worker with shifting patterns reflecting changing life conditions. This cyclical complementarity is a structural dynamic in absence. In more formal terms, we take absence as the class of events to be explained. We hypothesize that explaining variables will cluster in domains of the social work system and the life-span of the individual worker. We anticipate that explanatory conceptions will encounter different patterns of explanation at different levels of human reality. In early absence inquiry, presumably based upon the evident fact that it is the individual worker who is absent, the individual was assumed to be the unit of analysis; psychological and

biological variables were assumed to be primary. When we view absence as a social phenomenon, the unit of analysis becomes social/cultural, for example, the work place. We see both personal and social perspectives together with their modes of interaction to be useful and complementary. For shorthand purposes, they may be labelled as endogenous, exogenous and transogenous.

Prior research has concerned itself primarily with endogenous and exogenous variables and the formal expectations that exist between individuals and organizations; usually the time-space expectations that are codified in the contract. Our interest also includes transogenous variables, specifically the development of informal expectations that emerge among collections of workers, and between workers and their supervisors.

Absence, absenteeism, and problems of measurement

Perhaps the first issue that needs to be addressed is the distinction between absence and absenteeism. To this point the terms have been used interchangeably, but in fact, absenteeism is more appropriately thought of as a subset of absence. Ballagh, Maxwell, and Pererea (1987) see absenteeism as "potentially (emphasis added) controllable absences caused by attitudinal problems or by illness, injuries, or personal absences which could be prevented" (p. 1). Similarly, Jacobson (1989a) defines workplace absence as "involuntary and unavoidable," whereas absenteeism represents "an expression of employee choice" (p. 3). Absenteeism, as a subset of absence, is therefore distinguished by volition. Unlike absence, in which an employee simply cannot attend the workplace, Gibson has described absenteeism as "a presence with a preference," i.e., workers elect to absent themselves from the workplace because they prefer to be elsewhere. In cases of absenteeism, organizational expectations take a back seat to personal preference, whereas in an absence, organizational and personal expectations are aligned, but go unfulfilled because of unavoidable circumstances.

This distinction between absence and absenteeism is perhaps less clear in practice. For example, absences due to illness, and assumed to be involuntary, are often subject to employee manipulation (Hill & Trist, 1955; Jones, 1971; Nicholson, 1976). Take the case of a teacher who feels a cold coming on. One teacher might continue to attend work until the cold becomes so debilitating that s/he must stop, while another teacher might take a day off as preventation against further sickness. In this second case, what might be viewed as voluntary and avoidable absenteeism is taken to prevent potentially involuntary, unavoidable absences.

Faced with the dilemma of distinguishing between voluntary and involuntary absence among employees, researchers and practitioners tend to focus instead upon the frequency and duration of such occurances, defining absenteeism as "habitual or frequent absence." This orientation favors quanitative to qualitative differentiations between absences that may involve choice, thus changing to issue to one of appropriate measures Chadwick-Jones et al. (1982) state,

> Up until now, very little systematic effort has been made to refine and develop measures of chosen absence.
>
> ...The development of valid quantitative measures is, obviously, central in the development of explanatory formulations (of chosen absence) (p.60).

According to Nicholson (1977), measurement of absences by frequency is superior to all other types of measurement. Some researchers (e.g., Allen, 1981; Kopelman & Schneller, 1981; Nicholson & Goodge, 1976;) report that frequency measures of absences are more sensitive to casual absences. And numerous studies of absenteeism have incorporated the Frequency Index (FI) which uses the number of times absent within a specified period as an indicator of voluntary absence (Breaugh, 1981; Chadwick-Jones et al., 1971; Chadwick-Jones et al., 1973a; Johns, 1978; Keller, 1983; Muchinsky, 1977; Nicholson et al., 1976).

Chadwick-Jones et al. (1982), while in general agreement with the FI as a measure of voluntary absence, suggest that using more than one index might prove beneficial. Chief among these other indices is the short term index (STI). According to Chadwick-Jones et al. (1982), "levels of short term (one and two day) absences for an organization are more likely to be valid indicators of chosen absences" than are other measures such as total time lost. Gibson (1966) and Frogatt (1970a, 1970b, & 1970c) also support the notion that one and two day absences, in contrast to extended absences, are more likely to be voluntary in nature.

In conclusion, qualitative distinctions between absence and absenteeism are easier to ascribe in theory than practice. As a result, assumptions about the frequency and duration of absence have led to the proponderance of quantative analyses in this area, which, as noted earlier, tend to be dependent upon special-interest evidence collected by organizations.

Studies of Absence in the Workplace

As noted earlier, modernization has institutionalized absence control around specified time and place expectations. Workers are expected to spend a specific amount time at the site of production. The 'efficient' factory model that undergirds public elementary and secondary education in the U.S. has an implicit expectation of daily attendance at the school site. Teacher attendance can therefore be treated as a dichotomous variable, a teacher is either present or not. It is important to note that this location requirement, common to much of the industrial sector of the economy, does not hold for all of the informational sector and varies by level of education. Specifically, in higher education, a professor may be absent from the worksite, yet still be actively involved in information production, participating in field research or a conference.

Analyses of absence in elementary and secondary education allows for relatively easy monitoring because of this location requirement. Data can be readily collected and

organized on the basis of frequency and duration of absence. Because of this bureacratic invention, social control can be maintained with relatively low expenditures of enegy.

As the study of absenteeism has evolved, there has been a shift in what might be considered the locus of control, i.e., Is the decision to be absent from work an individual or social phenomenon? (Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, & Brown 1982).

The absenteeism as individual choice perspective typically portrays absenteeism as a manifestation of job dissatisfaction. This "pain-reduction" model suggests that workers withdraw from the workplace in order to reduce dissatisfaction. Absenteeism is therefore an individual decision based on personal need in light of organizational constraints. Proponents of this perspective typically examine absenteeism through correlational analyses of employee job satisfaction, personal characteristics and individual attendance patterns. The locus of decision-making control is internal and the primary unit of analysis is the individual.

A variation on this approach is Steers & Rhodes (1978) process model of employee attendance that considers both individual and organizational factors, including:

(1) Individual characteristics: such as education, tenure, age, sex, race, marital status and family size;

(2) Characteristics of the job: such as the scope of the job, the amount of role stress, work group size, leadership style, peer relations, opportunity for advancement;

(3) Motivation to attend: such as economic and market conditions, policies related to sick leave use, incentive/reward systems, work group norms, personal work ethic and organizational commitment -- primarily influence voluntary absence;

(4) Ability to attend: such as illness and accidents, family responsibilities and transportation problems -- primarily influence involuntary absence.

In this model, attendance is a function of the following interactions:

- Individual characteristics influence employee values and job expectations;
- The characteristics of the job are assessed in light of these values and expectations;

- Subjective job assessments produce different levels of job satisfaction;
- The greater the job satisfaction, the greater the motivation to attend;
- Motivation is subject to constraints of both ability and pressure to attend;
- Actual attendance reflects individual decisions made as a result of this dynamic process.

While the Steers and Rhodes model was lauded for its effort to develop a conceptual framework for absenteeism, it was criticized for a lack of clear definitions and methods for measuring attendance motivation and the ability to attend (e.g., Brooke, 1987). Furthermore, subsequent research in education (Bridges, 1980; Ferris, Bergin & Wayne, 1988; Pellicer, 1984) and other sectors has generally concluded that job satisfaction, a pivotal variable in the model, is not a significant determinant of absenteeism (Blau & Boal, 1987; Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982).

A more recent study by Drago & Wooden (1992), suggest the effects of job satisfaction are mediated by workgroup cohesion such that highly cohesive groups with high satisfaction have low absence, while highly cohesive groups with low satisfaction have high absence. In other words, it appears that individual behaviors are being influenced by the collective social setting of the worksite.

Social exchange theory is an alternative explanation for absenteeism that suggests a locus of control that is influenced as much by cultural variables as personal ones, and therefore focuses on social interactions among individuals within an organization. Chadwick-Jones, Nicholson, & Brown (1982) write,

> (while) it is true that there may be wide individual differences in frequency and type of absence...these differences tend to occur inside the limits set by a particular culture. By this use of the word "culture" we mean the beliefs and practices influencing the totality of absences - their frequency and duration - as they currently occur within an employee group or organization (p.7).

> We do not wish to deny the reality of individual motivations, but to question the usefulness of abstracting them from their social context, because recognizing the individual reality must not be done at the expense of the social reality (p. 13).

These authors conclude that "intra-individual explanations of absenteeism must fail because absence behavior is inter-individual social behavior" (p. 16). From this perspective, absenteeism is considered in light of workplace norms as well as organizational constraints. These norms are informal expectations that develop among workers as they interact. They are a function of job design, work-unit size, level of interdependence between employees, and practices that arise in the workplace. Bridges (1980), for example, describes the 'norm of reciprocity' that causes individuals to feel an obligation to fulfill their work responsibilities to those with whom they work most closely. This norm arises from high worker interdependence which, in turn, is effected by work-unit size such that smaller units foster greater interdependence (Bridges & Hallinan, 1978).

For this perspective, the appropriate unit of analysis in the case of teacher absenteeism would be absence behavior in individual schools, as opposed to the absence behavior of individuals or absence rates aggregated to the district level. Johns and Nicholson's (1982) conceptualization of absenteeism emphasized this role of a site-level absence culture in determining employee behavior. Specifically, they define an absence culture as:

> the set of shared understandings about absence legitimacy in a given organization and the established custom and practice of employee absence behavior and its control (p. 136).

According to Johns and Nicholson (1982) an absence culture is made up of four components:

(1) a societal component: society's assumptions about employment and absence;

(2) an organizational component: an organization's hierarchy of jobs, division of labor, and system for monitoring absence;

(3) salience: the degree to which individuals collectively adhere to norms of behavior;

(4) social information processing: individuals will tend to behave as they observe others behaving regardless of rules and regulations governing such behavior.

The societal component helps to shape general attitudes and beliefs about absence behavior, but is not specific to an organization or worksite. It shapes workers preconceived notions about absence as they enter an organization. The organizational component, on the other hand, is more specific and is usually assumed to be relatively consistent across worksites, if workers within an organization are governed by the same collective agreement. This assumption may be a central weakness in much of teacher absence research. Susan Moore Johnson (1982) has found that provisions of a collective agreement are often interpreted differently among schools within the same district. One principal may enforce strict adherence to specific parts of the contract, whereas another may choose to ignore the same provision. As a result, there may be no clearly defined organizational component in a school district, which would be consistent with Weick's conception of schools being "loosely-coupled" organizations. We contend that in schools, the organizational component is better understood as a work-site component and that salience and social information processing are key factors for analysis.

According to Nicholson and Johns (1982), worksites with a high degree of salience will experience limited inter-individual variation in behavior. Whether the mean frequency of absence for the group is high or low, social information processing will cause workers to internalize the normative behavior they observe and reflect this behavior in their own. Simply put, workers tend to pattern their own behavior on their observations of others. As a result, Nicholson and Johns (1982) contend that in worksites with a high degree of salience, cultural norms are more accurate predictors of behavior than individual variables. An example of a site-based absence culture might prove helpful.

In an earlier study (Jacobson, 1991), it was found that six senior teachers in one building, all of whom were nearing retirement, had accounted for a considerable amount of

the absenteeism occurring in their district. These teachers had long since accumulated the maximum 200 sick days the district reimbursed upon retirement. As a result, rather than "lose" days accumulated beyond 200, these teachers had begun regularly using their additional annual allowance of sick and personal days. This use of sick leave was viewed as acceptable by the building principal, and no medical documentation was required of these individuals. Furthermore, the principal himself was nearing retirement and also taking non-reimbursable sick days. As a result, there was a workplace norm or absence culture at this one site that encouraged teachers to use all of their sick leave. Teachers no longer viewed sick leave allowance as a benefit, but rather as an entitlement.

Why study teacher absence?

While the issue of absenteeism has received considerable attention in industry, there have been very few conceptual or theoretical studies pertaining to teachers. The studies or articles which have appeared tend to be highly prescriptive, focusing on ways to improve teacher attendance, such as through the use of incentives (e.g., Freeman & Grant, 1987; Jacobson, 1989a, 1989b, & 1991; Skidmore, 1984; White, 1982), understanding job satisfaction (Bridges, 1980; Douglas, 1976; Pellicer, 1984; Slick, 1974); or simply describing the demographic correlates of absenteeism, such as age, gender, marital status, educational background, or years of teaching (e.g., Bridges & Hallinan, 1978; Ferris, Bergin,& Wayne, 1988; Hammond, 1982; Martin, 1987; Scott & McClellan, 1990).

These studies generally treat absenteeism as an individual phenomenon and, in most cases, do not take into consideration social interactions among individuals at the workplace and how these exchanges affect behavior. Conceptualizations of absenteeism as social exchange have not yet been applied to studies of teacher attendance behavior.

But why study teacher absence at all? To this point we have concerned ourselves almost exclusively with the conceptual issues that have arisen in this field of research. We believe strongly that research in education is meaningful to the extent that it informs the

practice of education, therefore we turn briefly to a discussion of the practical concerns that guide our research in teacher absence.

Practical Concerns

According to Ehrenberg et al. (1989), there are three practical reasons why further research is needed in teacher absenteeism. First, there is the belief (and some limited evidence) that teacher absenteeism has a negative effect student learning. "To the extent that less learning occurs when regular teachers are absent, student academic performance may suffer" (Ehrenberg et al., 1989, p. 1). "Teachers and administrators acknowledge that the worst consequence is a school day filled with videos or other 'busy work' for students" (Baker, 1988, p. 120).

Lewis (1981) reported that, "when teachers were absent more than thirteen days out of the school year, student achievement suffered" (p. 30). Azami & Serge (1982) concluded teacher absenteeism to be one of nine variables which haved a direct effect on student achievement. A study conducted by the Metropolitan School Study Council of Columbia University concluded that substitute teachers were educationally ineffective and that teacher absenteeism "decreased instructional effectiveness" (Capitan, Costanza, & Klucher, 1980: 1- 2). The National Association of Secondary School Principals (1988) declared, "Teacher absenteeism, like student absenteeism, can have repercussions throughout schools and the entire education process" (p. 1). In contrast, Smith (1984) found no definitive relationship between teacher absenteeism and student achievement. Thus, to date, there exists some empirical support for the claim that teacher absenteeism negatively affects student achievement, but conclusive evidence is lacking.

A second practical reason for study in this area involves the cost of teacher absenteeism. Bridges (1980) estimated the absence rate nationwide to be 3.75 percent at a cost of $500 million for substitutes. Lewis (1981) reported that teacher absenteeism had approached 15 percent in some districts and that the expenditure to districts nationwide was

over $2 billion for lost wages and substitutes. Ehrenberg et al. (1989) found that average usage of leave days (including sick, personal, religious, and professional development) taken by teachers in New York (outside of New York City) to be 8.9 for the 1986-87 academic year. Based on a 185 day teacher work year, this represents 4.8% of available work time. In a district of 500 teachers, which pays substitutes $60 per diem (about average for districts in Western New York), a 4.8% absence rate will result in additional personnel expenditures of $267,000.

Examining organizations outside of education, Gaudet (1963) noted that a reasonable absence rate should be in the 3% range, and that 2% was not unreachable. Applying these figures to the example above, if the district of 500 teachers reduced its absence from 4.8% to 3%, the savings would be $100,500 per year. Such a savings would go a long way toward controlling what Capitan et al. (1980) have referred to as "skyrocketing substitute teacher costs" (p.2).

The third reason pertains to student attendance and state funding. Ehrenberg et al. (1989) and Zafirau (1982) have found positive relationships between teacher and student absenteeism. If teacher attendance affects student attendance, then in states like New York where average daily student attendance is a determinant in how much monetary support a district receives, teacher absenteeism may indirectly and negatively affect state aid.

Theoretical Concerns

As noted earlier, we have become concerned about overly simple interpretations of employee time and place commitments, and the ways in which they are legitimized. These simplistic conceptions then create potential problems with the way in which research is conducted. Nicholson and Johns (1985) find fault with the fact that "most current studies of absence are conducted in a single level of single organization (p. 404)". They also cite the fact that most studies examine absenteeism from an individual perspective. Nicholson and Johns

conclude that the combination of these two factors, i.e., (1) the failure to compare data across sites, and (2) seeking individual explanations for absenteeism, is responsible for "the discovery of small and ephemeral relationships" (p. 405) between individual differences and absenteeism. As a case in point, Martin (1987), studied elementary teachers in 32 schools in a single district, but failed to find a significant relationship between any of eight individual variables and absenteeism.

Our first exploratory study attempts to address some of the concerns expressed by Nicholson and Johns (1985). Specifically, the questions to be addressed are:

1. How are workplace norms are established at individual schools?

2. Do these norms influence individual and collective patterns of attendance?

Therefore, in addition to looking at individual causes of absenteeism, the study also compared absence behaviors across four elementary schools in the same district. This approach is consistent with both Nicholson and John's suggestion that "contrasts between aggregations (firms, occupations, organizational levels, shifts)...would be more profitable" (p.405), and the suggestion of Ballagh et al. (1987) that worksites within the same organization be studied in order to determine if absenteeism is caused by factors specific to worksites (p. 3). In other words, if teachers at various worksites within the same school district work under the same labor agreement, district policies, and other district-wide procedures regarding absence, one would not expect marked variations in absence behavior. If systematic patterns emerged, then one might have reason to look more closely at is happening at the individual schools. As a way of mitigating some job specific factors (e.g., scheduling of the teachers' workday, grade level taught), this study is limited to elementary schools.

Study Methodology and Findings

The site for this study is a suburban school district in Western New York. The district, which will be referred to as Cherryhill, has four elementary schools. Teacher

attendance data was collected from the four elementary schools for three consecutive years (1989/90, 1990/91, & 1991/92). Across the district, absences of two days or less in duration, for illness or personal business, averaged 4.84 for 1991-92 school year, 4.42 for 90-91 and, 4.56 for 89-90. During that period, Peach School had the fewest incidence of absence each year and therefore was rank-order 1 every year (see Table 1). Note that Apple School was ranked 3 for all three years, and that with the exception of 1991/92 when they switched positions, Cinnamon was ranked 2 and Orange 4.

Table 1
Average frequency of short-term absences (<2.5 days)
Ascending rank-order in parentheses

SCHOOL	91-92	90-91	89-90
Peach	3.46 (1)	3.74 (1)	3.63 (1)
Cinnamon	4.79 (2)	5.28 (4)	5.60 (4)
Apple	5.56 (3)	4.41 (3)	5.02 (3)
Orange	5.57 (4)	4.25 (2)	4.27 (2)
Average	4.84	4.42	4.56

These fairly systematic differences raises the question of why teacher absenteeism varies across schools in a single school district. Eleven commonly used individual/organizational variables: gender, age, marital status, education level (B.S. or M.S.), years of experience in the school and the district, tenure status, teaching assignment, conference days taken, and sick leave accumulated)were regressed on the dependent variable of frequency of short-term absence. No significant relationships were reported in the aggregated analysis (although mixed results could be determined building by building, e.g., married teachers seem to absent more frequently at Cinnamon School but less frequently at Orange School). District-wide, single teachers seem to have a slightly higher frequency of absence but this difference is not statistically significant. This finding

is consistent with others that have looked at marital status and absence. Coller (1975) determined that single teachers were absent more than married teachers, although Marlin (1976) found the opposite relationship. Marchant (1976), Bridges and Hallinan (1978), and Redmond (1978) concluded that there was no relationship between marital status and teacher absence.

These findings, particularly the absence pattern at Peach School, suggest the existence of workplace norms that may negate the effects of individual variables. To explore this further, telephone interviews were conducted with teachers from each of the four schools to identify ways in the absence cultures of the schools differed.

Based on these phone interviews, a questionnaire has been developed that will measure the following cultural components: 1) leadership of the principal; 2) peer relationships; 3) nature of the work and job satisfaction; and 4) motivational conditions found in the school. Many of these survey questions were adapted from Taylor and Bowers (1972) Survey of Organizations, while others were extracted from a variety of sources and modified for use in schools. This questionnaire, which can be found in the appendix, will be given to all teachers in the four elementary schools.

Conclusion

This study is a first attempt to better understand workplace norms of absenteeism among elementary teachers in one school district. Deal (1985) has noted that school culture "consists of patterns of thought, behavior, and artifacts that symbolize and give meaning to the workplace" (p. 605). Moreover, Olmstead and Christensen (1973) have found a significant inverse correlation between positive culture and absenteeism rates. We believe that this relationship requires far greater attention then it has received. As noted throughout, this investigation has two key elements: i.e., how workplace norms are established through social interactions at individual schools and, how these norms then come to influence individual and collective patterns of attendance. Peterson (1988) has offered that teachers,

because of the way their jobs are designed have a limited opportunity to interact with peers and thus affect school culture. He suggests that principals are "the key culture shapers". In the design of the questionnaire survey, we explore the role of the building principal in forging school norms of attendance.

It is our hope that, in addition to making a contribution to the research in the field of teacher absenteeism, the results of this study and those that will follow will be of particular value to the practitioner. As noted earlier, teacher absenteeism seems to have negative consequences for students and school districts. School administrators have long been concerned with reducing teacher absence, but often without the benefit of really understanding the condition they are trying to remedy. In this regard, we find ourselves in complete agreement with Ferris et al. (1988) who contend, "It would seem that the sustained effectiveness of interventions aimed at reducing teacher absenteeism would be enhanced by a more informed understanding of its determinants" (p. 562).

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